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SUBJECT: ZHIRINOVSKIY, S LDPR LOOKS TO THE 2007 ELECTIONS

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) December marks the 17th anniversary of the establishment of the Liberal Democrat Party of Russia (LDPR). LDPR's lack of any discernible platform is compensated for by the indomitable LDPR Chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose instinct for the outrageous continues to resonate with a significant minority of the Russian electorate. Changes in the party's leadership, including the exclusion of one Duma Deputy, have led some to speculate that the party may be losing its luster, but members of LDPR's Duma faction are confident that, in the 2007 Duma elections, LDPR will cross the seven percent threshold required for continued representation. Some in LDPR see the creation of a second Kremlin-backed party, Spravedlivaya Rossiya, as a welcome move toward a more balanced, multi-party system that could collaterally benefit LDPR and other small parties. End summary.

The Man Behind The Party

¶2. (C) While analysts differ about LDPR Chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's intellectual capabilities and many of them find his rhetoric distasteful, all admit that his flair for publicity remains undiminished. New Director of the Levada Center Lev Gudkov in a recent conversation highlighted Zhirinovskiy's ability to use outrageous rhetoric to camouflage his continued affiliation with the Kremlin. Aleksey Mitrofanov, the Deputy Chair of the Duma Committee on Constitutional Legislation and State Structure and the party's spokesperson, seconded that assessment. Mitrofanov said that Zhirinovskiy's shrewdness and his ability to maintain links with the changing power brokers over the years had protected himself and his party from the whims of the Kremlin while leaders of other parties had been purged, destroyed, or effectively stripped of power. Gudkov thought that Zhirinovskiy continued to stay afloat by helping the Kremlin in imperceptible ways. Among them, Gudkov said, was Zhirinovskiy's usefulness in floating Kremlin-concocted policy trial balloons that were used to gauge the reaction of the population. Both Gudkov and Mitrofanov rejected rumors that Zhirinovskiy was contemplating retirement although Mitrofanov allowed that there may be "some significant changes in the party" following the 2007 and 2008 elections.

Presidential Aspirations

¶3. (SBU) According to Levada Center surveys, Zhirinovskiy ranks second only to Putin in name recognition among Russians. However, Putin is recognized for positive reasons, while Zhirinovskiy's name tends to be linked with the negative and/or polarizing things he has said or done. Although Zhirinovskiy may secretly harbor the dream of becoming President of Russia, our contacts said he would do so only in the highly unlikely event he got the nod from the Kremlin. As it is, Zhirinovskiy is comfortable with the status quo and, in fact, enjoys playing the diverse roles which ensure his party's continued presence on the political scene.

Member Maneuvers: Keeping It In the Family

¶4. (C) In late November, the media reported that:

-- Nikolai Kuryanovich, one of the party's more radical Duma deputies, had been excluded from the party. On his website, Kuryanovich claimed that he was expelled because he was beginning to "eclipse" Zhirinovskiy. Mikhail Vinogradov, Deputy Director of the Center for Current Politics, told us that Zhirinovskiy dumped Kuryanovich because the Kremlin did not like his excessively nationalistic rhetoric. Mitrofanov told us that the real reason was Kuryanovich's unwillingness to cancel his participation in the November 4 "Russian march," even after ordered to do so by Zhirinovskiy.

-- Yegor Solomatin, one of the party's most influential members and its manager of regional and local relations, has also recently left the party. The media reported he had left to pursue a job in the Federal Audit Chamber. Solomatin refused to comment about his reasons for leaving, or to

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confirm that Zhirinovskiy and he had disagreed on key issues; however, he denied that he had the Audit Chamber in his sights. Mitrofanov described Solomatin as irreplaceable, and traced his departure to the accumulated strains of intra-party sniping. He admitted that Zhirinovskiy had unsuccessfully tried to woo Solomatin back, and that efforts to find a successor had to date been in vain. Mirofanov discounted rumors that Zhirinovskiy had appointed his 34 year old son Igor Lebedev, a Duma Deputy since 2003, to serve in Solomatin's place. (Contacts describe Lebedev as an unknown quantity who has done little in his three years as Duma Deputy.) Mitrofanov predicted that Solomatin might eventually join the "second" Kremlin party, Spravedlivaya Rossiya (SR).

-- Sergey Abeltsev, LDPR member and Deputy Chairman of the Duma's Security Committee, is rumored as a possible contender for the governorship of Belgorod Region if the term of the current governor, Evgeniy Savchenko, is not extended.

-- Maksim Rokhmistrov is rumored to be leaving the party in order to pursue a job in the Federal Property Agency. (Note: Mitrofanov said that rumors of the impending departures of Abeltsev and Rokhmistrov were premature. Some in the media predict they will leave in spring 2007.)

-- On December 21, the LDPR website reported that four members of the LDPR's St. Petersburg faction had defected to SR.

LDPR Voters: "Rednecks" and "Stars"

¶5. (C) Mitrofanov said that Zhirinovskiy's style and rhetoric consistently attracted a core group of voters whom he described as "rednecks who vote." The "rednecks" were middle to lower-middle class men who are not well educated, but who have strong opinions about how things should be done

and who want to "make something with their lives." LDPR's "rednecks" are discontented, said Mirtorfanov, and "not very smart." In order to retain their loyalty, Zhirinovskiy focuses on the issues that are the source of their grievances. That means, he said, that the party has no consistent policy, as it must constantly zigzag in its efforts to plumb its electorate's discontents.

¶6. (C) Mitrofanov predicted that LDPR would win the seven percent of the vote necessary to maintain its seats in the 2007 Duma elections. (His prediction tracked with current polling from Russia's three major public opinion research organizations: the Levada Center, The Foundation of Public Opinion (FOM), and the state-controlled All Russia Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM).) All three organizations maintain that over the past three years support for LDPR has remained constant, and ranges from six to eight percent. The recent decision to have Zhirinovskiy head LDPR's party lists in the Duma contests should ensure that the party crosses the threshold.

Party Financing) Russian Style

¶7. (C) Mikhail Vinogradov, Deputy Director of the Center for Current Politics, told us that the LDPR receives most of its financial support by selling spaces on its voter lists to well-heeled businessmen who want access in order to be able to influence legislation and other decisions. Vinogradov cited several examples of seats that had been sold to the likes of businessman Yevgeniy Ivanov and billionaire Suleyman Kerimov. Vinogradov said it would not surprise him if Zhirinovskiy had been compensated for helping the Kremlin advance its agenda.

LDPR,s Future

¶8. (C) Olga Kryshtanovskaya, Director of the Institute for Applied Politics; Tatyana Stanovaya and Yelena Bashkirova of the Center for Political Technologies, and Vinogradov were, unlike LDPR contacts, not optimistic about the party's future. Since LDPR is a party of "personality," they predicted its influence would naturally wane, but admitted that their prognosis had little to do with LDPR's prospects in 2007. Vinogradov thought the party might be more successful among voters in the long term if it focused on one issue of importance: illegal immigration, for example. He suggested that, given Zhirinovskiy,s helpful relationship

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with the Kremlin, it would not be surprising if LDPR would be considered as a possible third party in the Kremlin's multi-party initiative.

¶9. (C) Levada Director Gudkov believed that Zhirinovskiy was astute enough to remain aligned with the "powers that be." Mitrofanov was optimistic about the future of the party, even given the creation of the "second" Kremlin party "A Just Russia" (SR). He believed SR would dilute the monopoly currently held by United Russia, allowing the remaining parties greater entree into the legislative and governing process. (Note: Mitrofanov told us that since 2003 when United Russia consolidated its stranglehold on the Duma, not one bill or amendment proposed by LDPR deputies had been adopted.)

Comment

¶10. (SBU) LDPR's ability to both allow Russia's "rednecks" to vent their unhappiness with the status quo and to aid in the implementation of an agenda amenable to the Kremlin

should ensure that it remains a player, if only a secondary one, on the political scene for the foreseeable future. It remains to be seen what inroads "A Just Russia" will make on its LDPR's core electorate in 2007. As with so many other hypotheses about developments here, the March regional elections should serve as a good indicator of LDPR's medium-term prospects.

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